

Excerpts from "The Odyssey"

Odysseus and the Sirens

Background:

Soon after the journey to the Underworld, Odysseus and his crew sail near the island of the Sirens. The Sirens were mythic birdlike creatures with women's faces and arms. They sang beautiful songs that bewitched sailors and caused their deaths in shipwrecks. Odysseus knew how dangerous the Sirens were, but he wanted to hear their exquisite songs. He blocked the ears of his crew with wax, and had his men tie him tightly to the ship's mast so he could listen without danger and continue sailing home.

Excerpt:

Now with a sharp sword I sliced an ample wheel of beeswax

down into pieces, kneaded them in my two strong hands

and the wax grew soft, worked by my strength

and Helios' burning rays, the sun at high noon,

and I stopped the ears of my comrades one by one.

They bound me hand and foot in the tight ship—

erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast—

and rowed and churned the whitecaps stroke on stroke.

We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,

scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship

was racing past, and burst into their high, thrilling song:

"Come closer, famous Odysseus—Achaëa's pride and glory—

moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!

Never has any sailor passed our shored in his black craft

until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips,

and once he ears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man."